

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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HINCHEY CALLS ON FCC TO LEAVE MEDIA OWNERSHIP RULES ALONE

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-22) today joined Representatives Bob Menendez (NJ-13), Steny Hoyer (MD-05), Bernie Sanders (VT-At Large), and Sherrod Brown (OH-13) in hosting a press conference to call on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to allow further scrutiny of its plan to relax rules governing media ownership. Hinchey believes extensive analysis of the proposal by experts and the public should result in the plan being dropped.

"The public needs to have the opportunity to fully understand what's happening to the communication media in our nation," Hinchey said. "So far, most of this has been below the radar. I believe that's being done intentionally because the proponents of the changes know that public scrutiny will result in public opposition. These rules are just as important today as they were when they were written. It is unconscionable to enact any changes without fully involving the American people in the process."

FCC Chairman Michael Powell has announced that on June 2, the commission will vote on whether to relax media ownership rules without any public review or comment. It has become clear that the commission will vote to revise the rules in a way that would make it possible for fewer owners to control the information distribution system in the United States. This would continue a process of erosion that began in the early 1980s. The result has been a severe decline in the number of locally owned independent media companies.

Since 1975, two-thirds of America's independent newspapers have disappeared, and nearly three-quarters of the country's media markets have only one local daily newspaper. One-third of the nation's independent TV stations have vanished in the last 27 years. Eighty percent of the radio audience is now tuned to broadcasts controlled by just three corporations. Commensurate with this consolidation of ownership has been a decline in coverage of local news and events, particularly in rural communities, and a decline in the presentation of divergent viewpoints.

Hinchey has actively opposed any further erosion of media ownership rules. On February 3 he sent a letter to Powell, expressing serious concerns about the commission's planned rule changes. The letter was signed by 30 members of Congress. Hinchey subsequently met with Commissioner Michael Copps to discuss their shared concerns.

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Last week Hinchey introduced a resolution (H. Res. 218) that would express the sense of the House of Representatives that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should not revise its media ownership rules without extensive review and public scrutiny.

"I'm convinced that if we can shine a light on what's happening here and get people to pay attention, then the FCC will have to change course," Hinchey added. "The American people don't want a small handful of companies controlling their access to information. The public owns the airwaves and they deserve to be heard on this issue. Chairman Powell has called this process 'unprecedented.' Unfortunately it will result in an unprecedented disservice to the American public."

Despite numerous calls for a more open process, the FCC has held just one public hearing on its plans and has not allowed for public comment. Hinchey's resolution currently has 72 cosponsors and is supported by Consumers' Union, the Consumer Federation of America, the National Association of Black-Owned Broadcasters, the Communications Workers of America, the Newspaper Guild and the Media Access Project. It urges the FCC to preserve the current rules, to examine the consequences that can be expected if the rules are weakened, and to inform the public of its findings. It also calls on the commission to allow for extensive public review and comment on any proposed changes to media ownership regulations before issuing a final rule.